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# Mitch: In Dark on CIA Mail Peep

By JOSEPH VOLZ

Washington, Oct. 24 (News Bureau)—Former Attorney General John N. Mitchell, who is appealing his conviction in the Watergate coverup case, denied under oath today that he ever knew about any mail-opening operations conducted by the CIA.

Mitchell, returning to the Senate Caucus Room where he testified before the Watergate committee at nationally televised hearings in July 1973, sharply contradicted previous testimony from former CIA Director Richard M. Helms, who said Mitchell had been told and had "no hang-ups" about the mail-opening operation.

Mitchell recalled a June 1971 meeting with Helms, but said that they mainly talked about another topic, which he refused to discuss with the Senate Intelligence Committee in open session, apparently for "national security" reasons. The former attorney general said that Helms only mentioned "mail covers," which are not illegal and involve copying whatever is written on the outside of envelopes, but not opening the envelopes.

Opening and reading another's mail is illegal, however.

The pipe-smoking Mitchell insisted that not only did Helms keep him in the dark about the CIA's mail-opening operation, but that the late FBI Director, J. Edgar Hoover, never told him about a separate, 26-year-long FBI mail-opening program, which was ended in 1966. Mitchell

became attorney general in 1969.

Mitchell also denied, as he has before, that he was involved in putting together the now famous 1970 "Huston Plan", which proposed illegal mail openings and break-ins for domestic intelligence purposes. He insisted that he strongly recommended to then President Nixon that he cancel the plan. Nixon has contended that he did stop the plan after 10 days, but no presidential memorandum or document ordering the halt has ever been made public. The CIA mail-opening operation continued for three more years after the alleged end of the Huston Plan.

As Helms did, Mitchell refused today to say flatly that mail-opening is always illegal, even though it is forbidden by federal law. Mitchell said that a President has broad powers and that it is up to the courts to define just what he can and cannot do in the intelligence field.

Four FBI officials and an ex-FBI inspector told the Senate panel today that the bureau had opened mail on a limited scale, but that Hoover had ordered the practice ended in 1966 "because he had a regard for the climate



UPI Telephoto  
Former Attorney General Mitchell at Senate Intelligence Committee probe.

of the times," in the words of W. Raymond Wannall, top FBI counterspy.

Wannall said that the FBI was extremely selective about opening mail in New York and other cities and incomplete FBI records show that only 1,100 letters were opened. The CIA, on the other hand, admitted opening almost 216,000 letters during its operation at New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport.